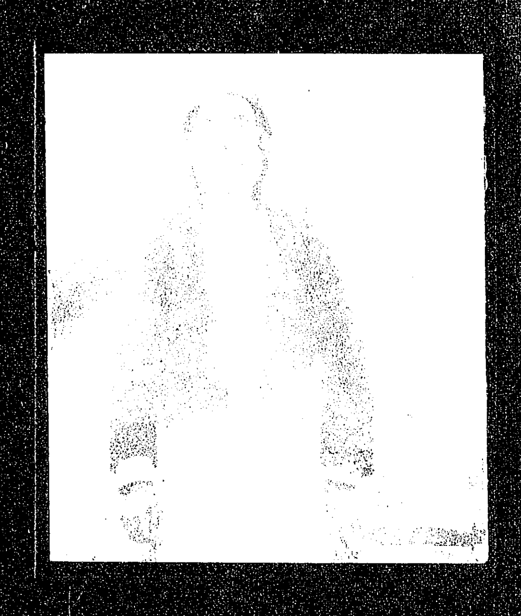
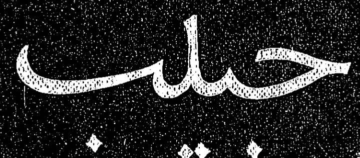
HABEEB THE BELOVED



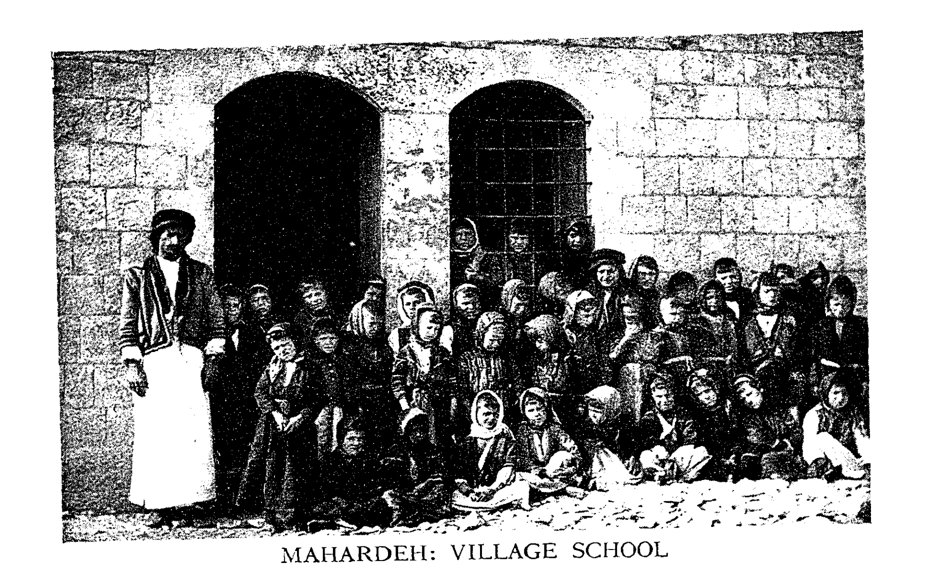


BY WILLIAM S. NELSON D.D.


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HABEEB THE BELOVED



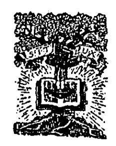
MAHARDEH: VILLAGE SCHOOL

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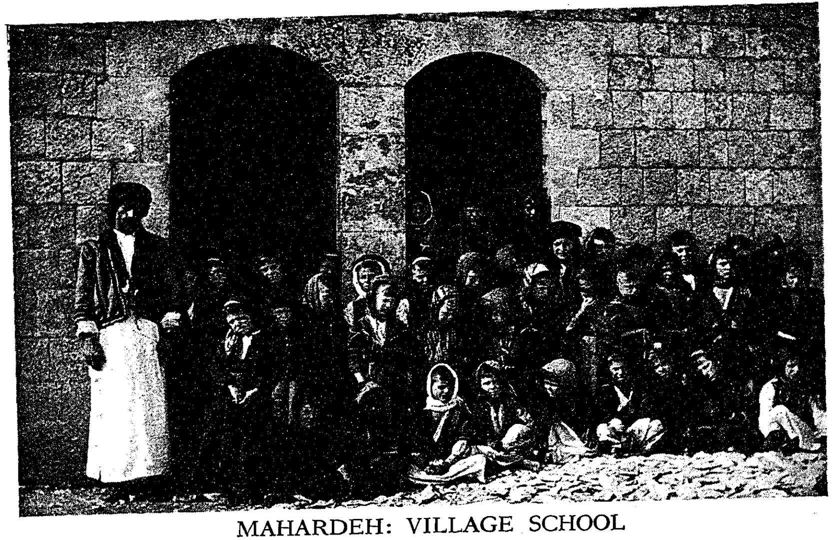
A TALE OF LIFE IN
MODERN SYRIA

BY

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PHILADELPHIA
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1913



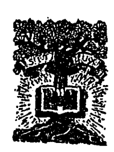
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THIS LITTLE BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THOSE IN WHOSE
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I LOVE AND TO WHOSE SERVICE I HAVE GIVEN
MY LIFE, FOR THE SAKE OF HIM, WHO,
IN HIS EARTHLY LIFE, WAS ONE
OF THEM, THE SYRIAN PEOPLE

THE AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION

IN the story of Habeeb the Beloved Dr. Nelson has both reflected his own power of insight and thrown open a window by which the reader can catch a glimpse of Syrian life and mission work. Having lived many years in the land in which the story is laid, the writer has not had his eyes diverted from men by the easier study of their manners and customs. He recognizes that a nation is no stronger or purer than its citizens, and in the story of Habeeb we are told that on Syrian soil and in the somewhat stifling atmosphere of Turkish suspicion and intrigue the most perfect and beautiful flower of simple Christian faith and character can strike its roots. One who has been in Syria and who has passed over the road from Beirut to Sidon cannot help but picture the scene as illustrative of the central thought of the book. Everywhere he gazes upon rocks and stones. The fields and hillsides are a tumbled mass

of bowlders. It does not seem possible that they could lend themselves to cultivation, yet ever and anon where the rough Syrian plow has done its work the seeds have struck their roots and the roughness has given way to growing vines and grain. This is typical of the way Habeeb's faith sprang up midst the rocks of persecution and in the hostile soil of bigotry and of the unraveled ethics of eastern life. In this respect the book is a most refreshing bit of optimistic realism. But it is also more than an ideal picture. It sketches quickly and in deft outlines a vivid story of Syrian life. The reader learns to know Habeeb, but when he has finished the book he will know much else besides. Habeeb lifts the curtain and reveals Syria.

Biography is often the best history. Facts are vitalized when related to persons. A personal diary is more fascinating than a mere record of events. If one wants to understand a specific period or a nation's story he must read the lives of the men of that period. It is significant that the life of Christ is recorded four times in the

gospel. It not only emphasizes its importance but it vivifies the environment in which he lived. With skillful hand Dr. Nelson has used the story of Habeeb as a lens through which the work of a missionary in an oriental country can be seen.

From the first page, where one is introduced to the missionary camping party starting for Hamath, until the close of the book the sketches follow one another in rapid succession. The chapters of the book indicate its scope. But the chapter headings do not begin to indicate the wealth of imagery in the book, for in each is recorded in miniature the customs and manners of the time. One can see Habeeb, erect, keen, grave and gay by turns, coming out from Mahardeh to meet the missionary. One can share with him in his struggle with his father, who would not permit him to remain at home if he confessed himself a Protestant Christian. One can feel the sob of the man's heart as his wife leaves him, its throb of joy when she returns, even though he feigns sternness. Then there are the wedding scenes with the wild riding

of the participants, the meeting with supposed highwaymen on the road to Aleppo, the river picnic, the prison conversion — all of which give the author a chance to reveal a flash-light glimpse of the land and life he would show to us.

But there is even still deeper significance in the book when one remembers wherein lay the origin of Habeeb's faith. No chapter of the volume is more significant than that which tells of Habeeb's conversion. He heard that a colporteur was in town. He sought him out. He argued against the doctrine in order not to be deprived of hearing the story. At last he obtained a Bible by exchanging for it an old sword, and from that day the promise of God was fulfilled and the spirit of God laid hold upon him. Without wavering he lived his life, not as a recluse but as a man of affairs — not entering into controversy but unrelaxing in his vigilance, until he won the respect of all his neighbors and even of his father who once opposed him.

Habeeb the Beloved is a remarkable story of the living, vitalizing, and transforming

power of the Word of God. One such life story as this is an apologetic for the inspiration of the Scriptures that cannot be answered. It is both a summons to the man who has neglected it and a rebuke to the one who timidly shields it. Habeeb found Christ through the Word, and could some loving friend be found to record their history there would be thousands of other testimonies such as Dr. Nelson has given of Habeeb the Beloved.

Such are the contents of this little book. It is a vivid, delicate, refined tracing of a Syrian Christian and of Syrian scenes. It is a book to lay on one's table ready for the moment when the spirit needs refreshing. It has the effect of a tonic on one's jaded spirit. Its value lies in its simplicity and its purity. No one can lay it down without an added interest in Syria and a reënforced belief that it is worth while to carry the gospel to that land which gave us the Christ and is now the scene of a life and death struggle between superstition and progress.

STANLEY WHITE.



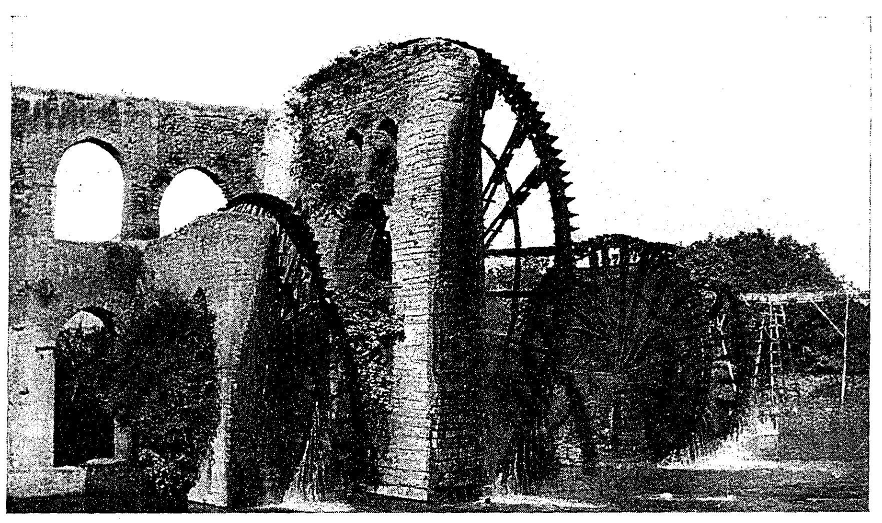
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HABEEB THE BELOVED



WATER WHEELS AT HAMATH

HABEEB THE BELOVED

I

THE FIRST ACQUAINTANCE

IT was a bright, warm morning in May. The missionary party, in the city of Hamath, were ready for the next stage of their journey. The camp beds on which they had slept had been folded, the bedding had been rolled up and put into bags, the kitchen outfit had been packed away, and the horses were at the door. The narrow city street seemed far narrower because of the crowd of horses and mules which jostled each other in it. The men quarreled over the arrangement of the loads, the horses bit and kicked in apparent viciousness, and a crowd of inquisitive children filled the background.

The young missionaries, who had been less than six months in the country, were

making their first tour, and everything was taken as a matter of course. The rough, guttural sounds of the Arabic might be swear words, or they might be merely the emphatic expression of superior authority or wider experience. It was all the same to their ears, to which not one word in five conveyed any clear meaning.

After affairs seemed to be in an inextricable tangle, they suddenly straightened out, as a skein of yarn will sometimes do when the patient worker gets hold of the end in just the right way. The cook came to the door and asked cheerfully if the ladies and gentlemen were ready to mount. The older missionary, with his dignified bearing and long gray beard, was the object of courteous treatment by the deferential Syrian friends, while the younger missionaries and the ladies were left to look out for themselves, or received such belated attention as could be given them after the farewell appropriate to the senior member.

When all were safely mounted, the caravan started up the steep road out of the city, and was soon on the level plain which extends in every direction from the vicinity of old Hamath.

The city itself lies in a hollow through which flows the Orontes River. Almost in the middle of the city, and on the bank of the river, rises the artificial mound, on which once stood an imposing castle. This has wholly disappeared; merely a brown mound of clay marks the site. Luxuriant gardens indicate the line of the river, and great water wheels, turned by the swift current, raise the water from the river to aqueducts which irrigate the gardens and distribute water to some of the old houses. These great wheels form a most picturesque feature of the landscape, and the weird creaking of their heavy wooden axles is an unfailing accompaniment to the other varied noises of a large city. The streets are narrow, crooked, and far from clean. In the sum-

mer heat cholera often visits the place. The wonder is how any of the people escaped the first visitation. The stranger notes with surprise the number of persons he meets who have lost the sight of one eye or are wholly blind. Ophthalmia is prevalent and takes the quick, acute form, often running through an entire household, leaving no one with unimpaired vision.

After reaching the plain above the city, our party stopped for a look backward. At our feet, in the hollow by the river, lay the old city of Hamath, with its flat-roofed houses, its many minarets, its beautiful gardens, and the winding river passing through the center, and the old castle hill, rising in its somber barrenness. All around this city is the larger city of the dead. Thousands of rough, uncared-for graves, with little mounds and rude black stones, make a gloomier setting for the gloomy old city, whose history goes back to the dim past of the earliest Bible records. To the

east the plain stretches out, almost unbroken, to ancient Palmyra and the Syrian desert. To the north, over a rolling plain, is the road to Aleppo. To the south, in the distance, rise the summits of Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon; while to the west the view is limited by the coast range of mountains, the home of the Nusairiyeh people, probably the last remnants of the old Canaanites.

Our road lay a little north of west, and was almost level. Soon after leaving the city we passed a ruined cistern, in which a fig tree had taken root. Not another tree did we see in our fifteen miles' ride. It was tiresome to keep our horses down to the pace of the pack animals, so the party became somewhat scattered along the road. At one point the younger missionaries were recalled by the report of a gun and by vigorous shouting. Upon galloping back, they were gravely reproved by the senior member, who enlarged on the danger of attack and the necessity of keeping the party

together. The gun had been fired by the cook, who was alarmed at the unfriendly remarks of some Bedouin Arabs who suggested the advisability of investigating the large saddlebags carried by the animal on which he rode.

After about two hours the road made a slight descent to a small stream. At this point we found a large group of swarthy men in the costume of the desert, their heads covered with the loose kerchief, held in place by a double black coil. The gathering would have appeared formidable had there not been such evident tokens of cordial welcome and oriental hospitality. It was a delegation to meet the honored senior member of the party, whose name was known and loved throughout all Syria, and also to welcome the new missionaries, coming for their first visit to Mahardeh. This was but the second time foreign ladies had visited this town; hence there was much curiosity on the part of the people.

Conspicuous in this group of men was a plain person who was obviously a leader among them. He was in the prime of life, his beard but slightly touched with gray. His figure, while not tall, was erect, and his bearing was dignified and grave. His head-dress was held in place by a small turban, instead of the black coil worn by the others. His words were few but emphatic. His voice rang with joyous cordiality. His keen eye shone with a penetrating brightness. As he came forward to extend his hearty official welcome to his village, we had our first glimpse of Habeeb el-Yaziji, the founder of the church in Mahardeh; and here began a loving fellowship that was to last for a quarter of a century.

After the greetings were over, the enlarged party resumed the march for an hour longer. Then we saw before us a group of flat-roofed houses, all the color of clay, crowded together for mutual protection. Nowhere in Syria may peasants live

in scattered, isolated houses as do the rural farmers in America. They always live in villages near the center of the lands they cultivate. It thus happens, frequently, that the plowmen and their oxen must travel several miles at the beginning and end of their day's work. The fields of growing grain stretched away in every direction. Beneath the houses are caves in which grain is stored and cattle are stabled, to protect them from the raids of the Arabs.

In those days the village paid as much in blackmail to the Arab chiefs as they did in taxes to the government, and practically for the same purpose — to be let alone. It was a frequent occurrence for a group of Arab horsemen to come to the village toward evening. They went directly to the sheik's house, where they received a warm welcome and liberal hospitality. In the course of the evening the leader of the party would intimate to the sheik that

trappings were needed for their horses, or pieces of the home-woven cotton cloth for their households, or a heavy cloak for the chief. Whatever was thus called for was promptly supplied, and the price — with the cost of entertainment — was entered in the books as part of the village expenses, to be collected with the government taxes. There was no more reluctance to paying the one than the other.

We were taken to the home of Habeeb, where we were made welcome, though at considerable inconvenience to the family. Yet, they gave no sign of annoyance. Our host did show some displeasure at the idea of the ladies' eating with the gentlemen in public, as that would be considered by the villagers highly derogatory to the men's dignity. In the evening, when the people came in for the informal service, he remonstrated also because the newly married young missionaries sat side by side on the floor, among the worshipers. Now, after many

years, and after repeated visits in that home, I can say I have never received more perfect courtesy or more complete hospitality, than I have always met, in the house of Habeeb, in Mahardeh.

II

FIRST GLIMPSES OF LIGHT

ABOUT the year 1864, when Habeeb was a young man living in his father's home, an evangelical colporteur began to visit the village of Mahardeh. Habeeb's father was a man of some consequence in the village, being recognized as the agent of the bishop in all secular affairs. In this position he was especially hostile to every attempt to turn the minds of the people toward the evangelical doctrine. In every oriental household the father is an autocrat whose word is absolutely binding upon everyone who lives under his roof.

Habeeb had heard something of this new doctrine, and, being of an active turn of mind, he desired to learn more, but was unwilling to offend his father. One day, while working at the loom, he heard that

the colporteur was in town. Saying that he was going to repair a water pipe, he slipped from the house and hastened to the public room of the sheik's house, where it is the custom for strangers to go. To his surprise and chagrin, he found his father there, in heated argument with the colporteur. He slipped into an obscure corner, hoping to escape notice. After a time he was seen and reprimanded by his father. To conceal his real interest in the Word and his sympathy with the colporteur, he joined his father in the argument, denouncing the heretical position of the evangelicals.

Such infrequent opportunities of learning more about the new teaching were not sufficient to satisfy the increasing hunger of Habeeb, and so he began to inquire as to the possibility of securing a Bible for his own private study. He was too proud to ask the gift of a Bible, but he had no money, for his father held the family purse,

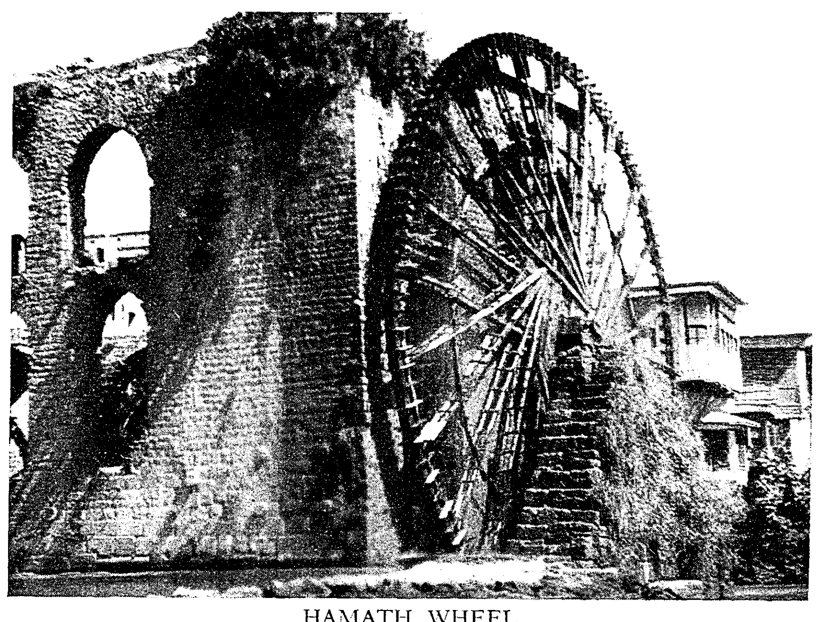
and the young man knew that he would never consent to throw away good money in such a purchase. Learning that Bibles were to be had from the Protestant pastor in Homs, he decided to investigate the matter. In lieu of money he took with him an old sword and set out on his forty-mile walk to Homs. He did not turn back until he had effected an exchange, leaving his old metal sword and carrying away with him the Sword of the Spirit. From that day the Word of God became his companion, counselor and comfort.

About this same time it was reported that the missionaries would pay people to become Protestants. This seemed an easy way to get money, so a party of ten or a dozen men set out to find the credulous agents of this new religion. They said:

"It is not so very different, anyway, and after we get the money, if it does not suit us, we can easily turn back to the old religion."

They started out in high spirits, anticipating a life of ease at the expense of the Americans. When they learned that the missionaries were not looking for people who wanted money, but for those who would give up everything for the service of Christ, the new faith lost its attractiveness, and they returned home, wiser but no richer than when they left. Habeeb's father was one of these seekers after money, and he naturally tried to cover his disappointment by renewed zeal for the old faith and severer restrictions upon the son who favored the new party. More than once the father turned Habeeb out of the house. On these occasions he went forth with nothing but the Bible, for he never left that behind him. When he was hardest pressed he was most diligent in searching for hidden treasure.





HAMATH WHEEL

III

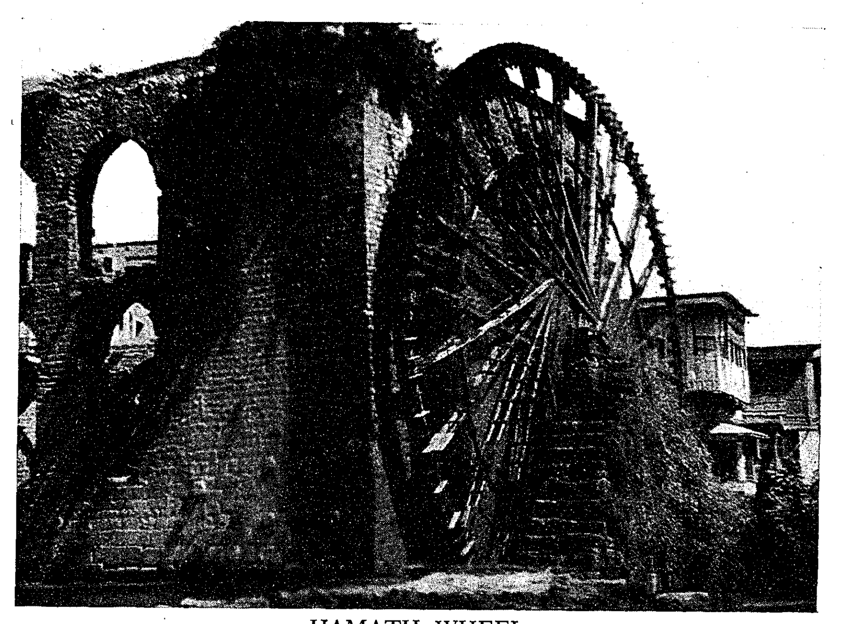
PERSECUTIONS

AFTER careful study of the Bible, Habeeb found it impossible to continue his former share in the worship of the Greek Church, and his conscience told him he should make his position clearly understood. One Sunday morning he was debating what step he ought to take, when his father summoned him to go with him to church.

"You go alone," said Habeeb, "as I have decided not to go to the Greek service any longer."

"Ah!" said the father. "I have noticed the change coming over you, and I will soon put an end to this folly, if you do not come with me quickly to church."

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as to the best way to deal with his rebellious son. On his return home he told Habeeb that there was no place in his house for a son who would not go to church.

"Very well," replied Habeeb, "it shall be as you say."

He arose at once, and started out with his wife, not knowing whither he should go. He had no means of earning a living, except by weaving, and the loom was in his father's house. Neither bedding nor clothes could be taken and no money would be given. No one would receive them in his house. Where, then, should they go? There was no hesitation, however. The young man called his wife to follow him, with naught in his hands but the precious Book.

As he left the door, the father half relented. Pointing to an unused apartment, he said, "Do not go away from town, go over to that other house."

The young man and his wife gladly sought

this shelter, in which they hoped to devise a plan for their future. The old mother surreptitiously brought them some supper, and, with tears in her eyes, besought her son to be reconciled to his father. The only answer was an attempt to turn the mother's eyes to her Saviour. Many years later it was my privilege to receive this old mother to full membership in the Evangelical Church in Mahardeh, where her son was the acting pastor. It was not long before the father realized that he needed the aid of his clever son more than the latter needed him, and so he called him back home.

Such experiences were repeated many times, and, on each occasion Habeeb obeyed his father, going when he said, "Go," and returning loyally when he said, "Come back," but never was there any yielding on the subject of religion, after the stand had once been taken. Sometimes the periods of exile continued for

months, and more than once the young people were obliged to leave town altogether. On one occasion Habeeb removed to Hamath and set up a loom in that city; but he never felt at home except in the humble surroundings of his own village. On another occasion refuge was sought in a Moslem village, near Mahardeh, and a long period was spent among this alien people, who were more kind-hearted and charitably tolerant than the nominal Christian neighbors and family relatives in his native town. Friendships made in this time of trial continued through life and later gave many an opportunity to sow the seed which will bear fruit in the Lord's own time.

At first Habeeb's wife followed him merely because she was his wife, and not from sympathy with his religious views. On one occasion the father took advantage of this fact and decided to make things harder for the husband. He care-

fully arranged the matter in advance and persuaded the wife to help in the project. When all was ready, a cause of quarrel was easily devised, and the father, as so often before, ordered Habeeb to leave the house.

"Very well, it shall be as you wish, father," said Habeeb.

To his infinite surprise, his wife made no move to follow him, but said:

"I'm not going with you."

Habeeb's heart stood still, for he loved his wife and had never for a moment doubted her loyalty to him. But it would never do to let anyone see how hard he was hit by this new scheme. So he went out, silently and alone, without so much as a glance at the woman who refused to follow him. With a heavy heart he sought an empty room in a neighboring house, and arranged with the owner to furnish his meals. That night as he went to rest his only comfort was in the Book, but the

way looked very dark ahead of him and he could not understand the desertion of his faithful wife.

Before dawn next morning he was aroused by a noise at the door, but for some time he pretended to be asleep. At last he called out, in a gruff voice, "Who's there?" His heart almost ceased to beat as a woman's voice responded, broken by sobs: "It is your wife, come back to you. Please let me in."

Steeling himself against the desire of his heart, he answered roughly, ordering her away, trembling lest she take him at his word. Sobs and broken protests came back through the closed door, and a long colloquy took place — piteous pleading from without and stern conditions of acceptance from within. At last the door was opened. From that day husband and wife were never separated by the slightest misunderstanding, but walked together in perfect harmony until the temporary parting caused

by the passage of the faithful wife over the dark river a few years in advance of her husband.

On another occasion affairs went even farther. The priests convinced Habeeb's father that he must take the most strenuous measures to reclaim his recreant son, or else make an example of him for the benefit of others. One Sunday after the morning mass, a great company of men gathered in the open space in front of the house in which Habeeb was living. He was sitting at an upper window, overlooking this place of concourse. He had his Bible in his hand and was studying the Word and communing with his heavenly Father in prayer. The shouts of the people made it clear that they were bent on mischief. Some of them were gathering fuel for the flames intended to destroy the heretic. He understood their purpose and knew there was not a man in the village who would raise a hand or utter a word to

save his life. He turned to those comforting passages, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom," and "The very hairs of your head are all numbered." Looking down on the multitude he thought, "What can they do, if Christ is with me? and yet, if it is his will, why should I not give up my life, as Stephen and others have done?" Though he saw no way of escape from the angry mob, and fully expected to lay down his life in the flames, his heart was at perfect peace, and he calmly awaited the outcome.

One of the leading men came to his room and seized him by the throat, with cursing and reviling, to drag him down to the crowd. He asked why they should be so enraged at the name of Jesus. His only answer was a beating. Then he was dragged down the stairs.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the man loosened his hold, and Habeeb went

back to his room, to await the next move. As he looked down upon the mob, he saw it break up into little groups and gradually melt away, without any visible cause. To this day he does not know what it was that changed the purpose of the angry crowd, but gives all the glory for his deliverance to the heavenly Father.

IV

OUTSIDE CONNECTIONS

GRADUALLY a small group of believers gathered about Habeeb. These Christians made various plans for strengthening the work and extending its influence, but they realized that this would be attended with much difficulty and some danger.

On one occasion the local preacher from Hamath went to Mahardeh for a visit to the believers. In the evening, discussion was started by those who were hostile to the new doctrine, and much excitement was aroused. When the opposition were unable to accomplish anything by argument, they decided to take advantage of their superior numbers and use force. They succeeded in expelling the visitor from their village. He fled in the dark night, with bare head and feet. In the

darkness, after crossing the small stream about three miles from the town, he took the wrong road and arrived, late at night, at a Moslem village, where he found protection.

During one summer, a youth studying in the Syrian Protestant College at Beirut was asked to spend his vacation at Mahardeh, giving instruction to those who wished for light. He was welcomed by the little group of believers and made himself very useful to them in their study of the Scriptures. Such arrangements were resented by the hostile party, and it was decided to expel the teacher and intimidate those who showed a disposition to listen to him. A mob gathered one evening, and a descent was made upon the Protestant headquarters. The brave men went out to resist the attack, telling the teacher to keep in the background, as they would defend him. The teacher spoke up at once, claiming a position in the front line, if there was to be any fighting, and so won the loving loyalty

of the little band. To this day his name is highly honored and his work gratefully remembered, though he remained but a few months.

When persecution became general, Habeeb was obliged to make a wearisome journey to Damascus and Beirut, in order to secure the interference of the British consuls and the missionary bodies with the higher government officials. Never did he seek to escape any personal inconvenience or suffering, but only a free opportunity for himself and others to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience and the instruction of his Word. Wherever he went he won the hearts of all by his simple faith and earnest love.

The persecution was not all confined to those early years, for it sprang up again more recently, when the church seemed to be growing too fast for the comfort of certain persons. A rather aggressive teacher had been placed in charge of the school

and was winning many pupils and attracting the attention of the young men to the gospel. An attack was made on the school, and subsequent investigation showed the door quite covered with dents made by stones thrown by the attacking party. The teacher was waylaid on the road from Hamath, roughly handled and robbed. Complaint was made to the governor and word was sent to the missionaries. The governor took advantage of the trouble to order the closing of the school. As his action was illegal, it was a satisfaction to ignore his orders, open the building, and hold service in it, though the friends were very much afraid of violent interruption. The governor was made to understand that such interference with American schools would not be tolerated, and the affair was soon settled.

V

THE CHURCH IN THE HOME

WHEN Habeeb finally left his father's home — not in anger at the last — he set about building a home of his own. In this matter as in all others, the people of the village sought to do him harm. More than once they threw down in the night what had been built in the day. With the help of Moslem friends and by patient persistence, the simple home was at last completed, and the family took possession.

By this time there was quite a company of Protestant believers, and they must have a place to worship, but none could be built for this purpose. There was no way but to turn Habeeb's large room into a church on Sundays. For years this was the regular place of worship. It

PREPARING COFFEE

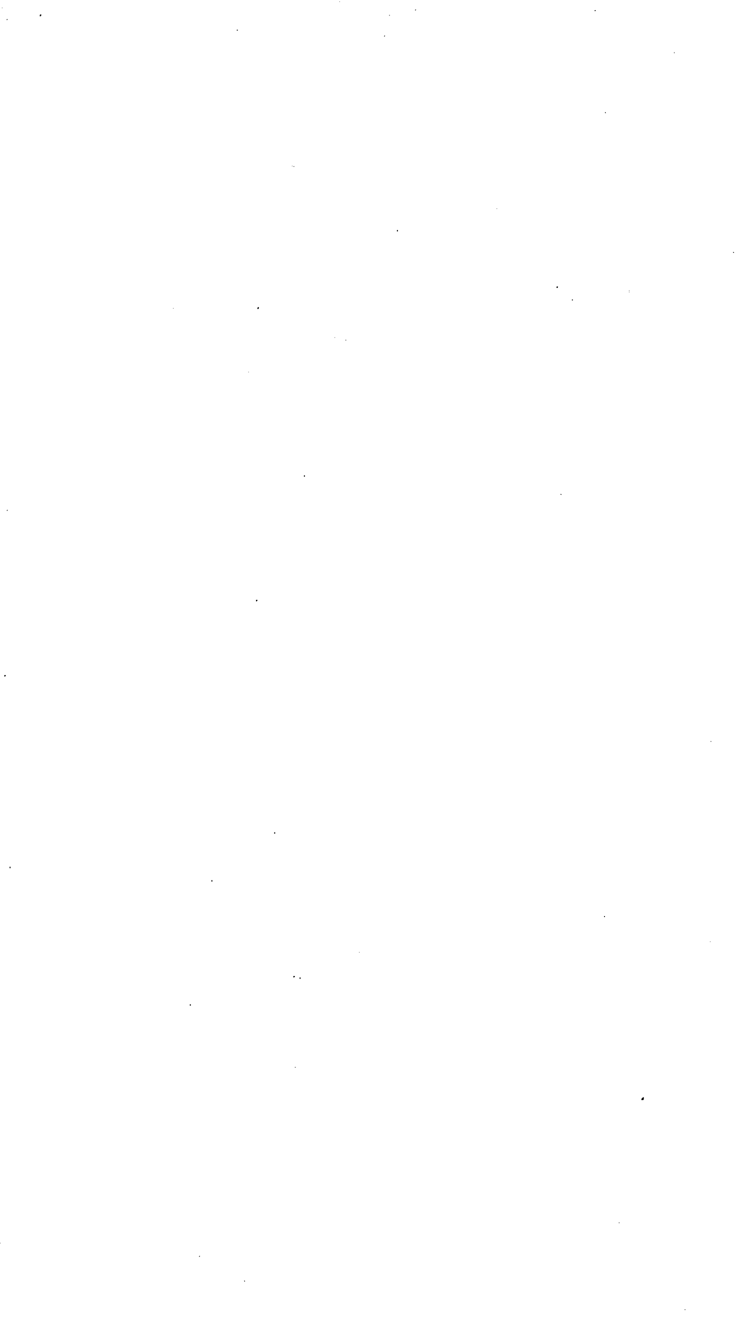
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was a large, square room with a vaulted stone roof, such as is commonly built in the village. Opening into the dooryard were one door and one window. Aside from this there was neither light nor ventilation, except from a few small openings near the roof. Mats were spread on the floor and there was a simple pine table for use as a pulpit near the door.

I have seldom enjoyed preaching more than I have in that room. Standing behind that little table, with my back to the wall, between the door and the window, I have looked down upon a group of upturned faces, full of eagerness for the message. Many of the men and most of the women were unable to read a word of their own language. The simplest facts of science were an unsolvable conundrum to almost all of them. Few had ever been farther away from home than the neighboring city of Hamath. The village costume for both men and women was somber and plain.

But those simple people, seated on the floor, were eager to hear the divine Word, and the intent gaze of their dark eyes was an inspiration for any preacher.

For many years the space was far too small for the regular congregation, and it became a difficult matter for the one who passed the elements at the communion service to make his way among the people, so closely were they packed together. More than once I have watched the late comers search for places. The floor space seemed to be wholly occupied, until a shaking movement would start somewhere and one person would be settled down here and another there, just as extra grains are shaken down into the measure that seemed to be full to the brim. It was a comfort to realize that there was no longer any danger of a drowsy worshiper's falling over, for he was so tightly wedged in that he could not do so. At last the shoes of the attendants, which were formerly left in the

low space just inside the door, had to be left outside. Half-a-dozen small children would be stowed away under the preacher's table. Finally some were obliged to be satisfied with what they could hear as they formed a group about the door and window, in the yard outside. At one communion service it was noticed that a young woman who had been accepted by the session did not appear to make her public profession of faith in Christ. Later inquiry revealed that she was present, but on her arrival at the service she had found it impossible to enter, and remained at the rear of the crowd outside the window.

The general communism of life in the villages extends to cattle and chickens as well as to human beings. In every home the chickens walk in and out with the same freedom as the children, and it is not uncommon to see a bamboo rod near at hand to drive them away whenever they become too aggressive or when anyone is

free to notice them. On one Sunday morning as I was reading the Scripture lesson at the opening of the service, the room was full as usual. I had removed my chair and had drawn the table as near the wall as possible. A shadow in the doorway indicated a belated arrival, but a glance revealed, not a man, but an enterprising goat! Even he could see there was not much spare room; but goats are not easily discouraged. Seeing no opening straight ahead, he turned toward the preacher, where his sharp eyes detected a narrow space directly behind him, and he started at once to occupy it. The preacher's foot was quickly raised and placed against the wall. This created a barrier which the goat respected, and he decided to go elsewhere. Experiences similar to this, repeated through many years, have emphasized our joy in the acquisition of a suitable place of worship.

One of the most interesting and pictur-

esque services I ever conducted in Mahardeh was in the warm summer time when the moon was bright. It seemed a pity to call the people into a house, so we decided to go out of doors to the threshing floor, from which the grain had been removed, leaving the broad, level space clear and clean. We had simply a small table to hold the Bible and a lantern to read by. The crowd of people sat in rows on the hard ground about us. Their dark faces and somber clothes looked weird in the bright moonlight, but the voices raised in the hymns of praise had a clear ring to them, and the fervent responses revealed an earnestness of purpose and clearness of understanding, that were a delight. Great buildings and fine surroundings are not necessary for true worship. It is in such open-air services as this that the baby organ is such an efficient help to the missionary.

This free use of his home for public services was another manifestation of the

completeness of Habeeb's devotion of all that he had to the Lord's service.

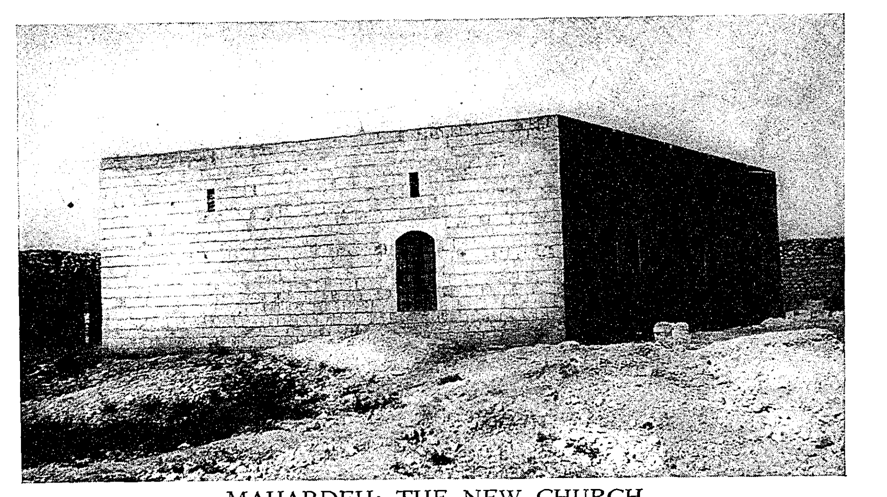
Some years ago three of the missionaries had spent Sunday in Mahardeh, intending to leave on Monday morning. They rose for an early breakfast, hoping to take the saddle as soon as it was over. The loads were packed, and the muleteers were either ready to start or were already on the road. At breakfast Habeeb seemed weary and preoccupied, even though busy as always in looking after the comfort of his guests. When questioned about his weariness he turned the matter off as of no consequence, while admitting he had been kept awake most of the night at the bedside of his sick mother. His whole attention was now devoted to the welfare of his friends. Nothing must be allowed to hinder their departure or to cloud the last moments of their stay. It was only after persistent questioning that they learned it had been not merely a sick bed, but a deathbed, and

that he had bidden his mother the last farewell at dawn just before coming to send away his guests in peace. As soon as they were gone the funeral would be held; but this must not interfere with their plans. Could courtesy go farther? It is needless to say that the departure was delayed until the missionaries had shown their loving fellowship by sharing in the last services at the grave.

VI

THE CHURCH BUILDING

IT would take a volume to tell all the plans and attempts made to secure a suitable place of worship for the growing congregation at Mahardeh. Habeeb's house, so long used for this purpose, would no longer accommodate those who wished to attend; but there were many obstacles in the way of securing a separate church building. As has been said, the land in Mahardeh is held on a communal basis, each farmer having assigned to him a certain section to plow from year to year. Each peasant who owns a share in the plowed land has a right to a place to build a house and store his grain. Certain others, resident in the village as shopkeepers or artisans, are given building sites, but nobody who already has one house can easily build another. The ecclesiastical authori-



MAHARDEH: THE NEW CHURCH



ties in the Greek Church were ready to see to it that no permit should be given by the government for the erection of a Protestant church. Matters were even more complicated by the fact that one third of the village lands were owned by two effendis in Hamath, both rich men. They took advantage of their superior position and their influence in the government circles to claim and exercise more influence in the village affairs than their ownership justified. As they were both of the Greek Church, they were hostile to the Protestant party. At one time a piece of land was actually secured, but after the foundations were laid the work was stopped through government interference.

The two effendis seized a piece of the public threshing floors at the edge of the village, inclosed it with a substantial wall, and secured a government title to the property in their own names. The piece of land was about an acre and a half in

size and nearly square. Within this inclosure they built a substantial house of solid masonry, about fifty feet by thirty. This was intended as a storehouse for their grain, since the previous year had been one of rich harvest. Two rooms were cut off from the main storeroom for caretakers. A cave was prepared and a cistern was dug. It was the plan to build rooms on top of the house for their own convenience and that of their families when they should choose to spend some time in Mahardeh.

Unfortunately for the fine plans of these two men, the next two years brought poor crops. Losses met them from other quarters and they were both brought into serious financial difficulties. They must find relief somewhere. They must dispose of something and find ready cash. What could they spare and where could they find money? This building in Mahardeh would never produce any income, and while it had been a matter of pride, it was

not of real importance. But who would buy it? No one in the village wanted it and no one was in a position to pay cash down for such a property.

The matter was brought to the attention of the missionaries and negotiations were opened. The result was that the Protestants of Mahardeh secured a commodious and far more substantial building than they could have hoped to erect for the same cost. The title was perfect and readily transferred, since it was to the interest of these men, who had formerly opposed the church building project, to arrange the whole matter. The purchase price was very reasonable and the whole affair was a real favor to the seller and a distinct advantage to the buyer.

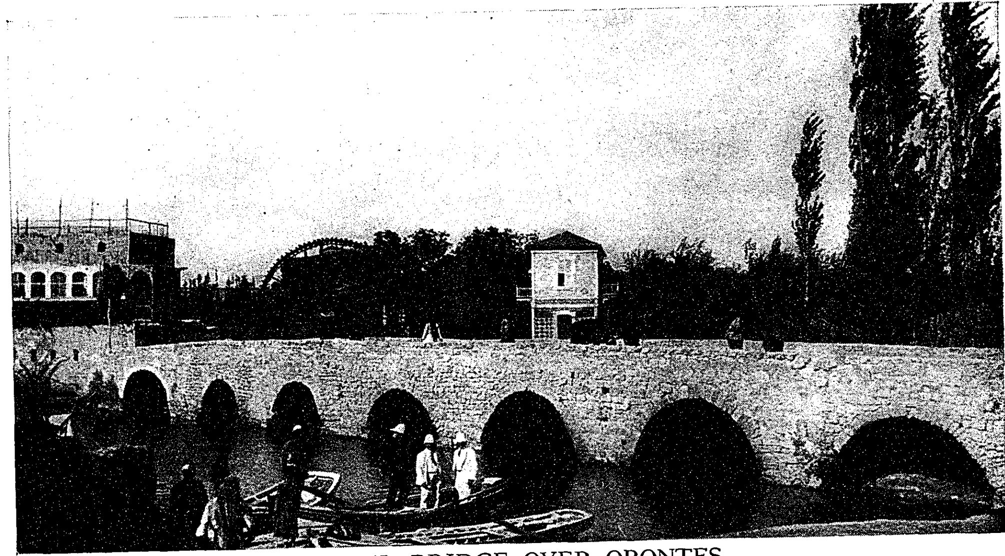
This is not the only time, in my own experience, when the Lord has made use of the necessities of the opponents of his people to provide a desirable place of worship for his children.

VII

A TRIP TO ALEPPO

FOR some years it fell to the Tripoli missionaries to direct the work in Aleppo, and on one occasion I decided to take Habeeb with me. When we set out from Hamath on the four days' journey we had quite a caravan, as we had two soldiers as escort, besides our own servants and the baggage animals.

As only the rudest accommodation was to be found on the way, we had our own food, with cooking utensils and camp dishes and a cook to prepare the meals. At the end of each day's ride we secured rooms in some village house for the night. Then our camp beds were set up and supper prepared as well as circumstances would permit. Everywhere a crowd of curious spectators gathered about us, examining



HAMATH: BRIDGE OVER ORONTES

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our clothing and other belongings and plying us with all sorts of questions as to our history and the object of our journey. Opportunities were afforded for missionary seed-sowing and for work by the lady physician of the party.

Everywhere on the road Habeeb's ready helpfulness was in evidence. As we rode along his conversation was full of information and suggestion. His thorough acquaintance with the people and their ways of life and thought was a continual assistance.

After some days spent in the city of Aleppo, we set out on our return over the same road and in much the same manner. On the last day we were to turn aside from the direct route, returning to Mahardeh instead of to Hamath. On the morning of this day we noticed a change in the bearing of our good friend. Instead of being merely our comrade in travel, he began to assume somewhat the air of a leader and host. This was because he was

to welcome us to his own home! As we rode across the hot plain, Habeeb drew more and more to the front. His position on his horse became more and more erect and his bearing that of a prince escorting his guests to his capital. At last we started down the long slope to the Orontes and crossed it on a bridge beside one of the many mills. Up the other side and we were actually in the lands of Mahardeh, and our host took full direction of our movements, greeting everyone we met with the most gracious salutation.

On reaching the village we were quickly at the familiar gateway and entered the courtyard. The manner was that of a gracious host ushering his guests into his castle. But alas, instead of cries of welcome there was utter silence, and instead of wide-open doors we saw everything closed and deserted. The chagrin on Habeeb's face would have been amusing had it not been almost tragic. The

explanation was simple. We had gained a day. As we were expected on Saturday, the wife and daughter thought to get the week's wash out of the way before we should come and had gone to the river so as to be ready next day with a grand welcome.

The door was finally opened, and we received the same cordial, unstinted hospitality which has never failed in that home. Soon we had an illustration of the difference between the Oriental and the Occidental. We were seated on the floor in the main room. Several of the friends and neighbors had dropped in to welcome us and to ask about the journey. Habeeb was giving attention to their questions, while watching for everything needed for the comfort of his guests. As we sat thus his wife came in and seated herself quietly at a little distance. He did not cast a glance in her direction. After a discreet pause she merely said to him:

"May God give you strength after your fatigue."

The tone of her voice and the expression on her face conveyed as much loyalty and affection as the most demonstrative welcome of an Occidental.

Another trip to Aleppo did not end quite so smoothly. On that occasion I had no one with me but my cook, who rode the baggage animal. On the way north we had joined a good caravan, and so had not asked for a military escort. The heat in the daytime was so severe for the animals, even in November, that we traveled chiefly at night, and it was a weird experience for those not accustomed to such travel. The company scattered along in loose, single file, many of the men walking beside their animals. Nothing disturbed the night silences but the dull tread of the horses' hoofs on the dirt road, the jingle of the bells on some of the mules, or the occasional shouting of the men to each other.

Overhead the clear, dark sky was made brilliant by myriads of stars, which in Syria seem far more numerous and vastly more luminous than in America. The bright moonlight threw grotesque shadows across the dark plain.

As the night hours passed and the steady jog was uninterrupted, the drowsiness became almost insupportable to one who is unused to turning night into day. Often during such night journeys, after exhausting every other device, have I dismounted and walked beside my horse, simply to wake myself up and avoid falling from the saddle. And never shall I forget the approach of dawn. As the dark hours lengthen and mile after mile of weary road is left behind, a faint change seems to come over the eastern sky. The stars become less in number and dimmer in that section of the heavens. A slight blush appears near the horizon, and then suddenly the edge of the sun comes into view above the level

plain, and almost on the instant the full disk of bright gold has sprung into the sky. Night has gone and it is again full day.

On the return journey we had occasion to remember the danger of depending on others for arrangements. I had asked a Syrian teacher to make inquiry for a caravan, returning to Hamath. If there were none going at the time I must return, application would be made to the governor for a guard, but I preferred to avoid this if possible. On being assured of a good company of strong men, it was arranged that we should meet outside the city. When it was too late to make other arrangements and we had started on our way, the strong caravan was found to consist of a few helpless men with donkeys and a wandering dervish on foot. There was not a weapon of any description in the company, and it was evident they counted on my protection of them, while I should receive no assistance in case of need.

All went well for the first two days. On the third day, about noon, we were warned of suspicious-looking horsemen on the road. My man and I had ridden some distance ahead of our companions and stopped for them to come up. As we were thus waiting, two well-mounted horsemen overtook us. Each one carried a rifle, though this is contrary to law, as none but soldiers may carry rifles. They saluted us properly and asked where we were going. On our replying that we were going to Hamath, they proposed that we go on together. I said we must await our companions, who were just coming up. Rather peremptorily they ordered us to move on with them.

Just then our friends came up and all moved along together. The horsemen maneuvered to separate us from the others, who were only too eager to get away from such company and had no further interest in us. One of the men then placed a cartridge in the breech of his rifle and aimed

it at me at a distance of some twenty feet. I was so sure it was merely a pretense that I simply laughed in his face. Thereupon he removed the cartridge, but charged upon me with his gun before him, giving me a punch in the back I did not forget for some time. Then they demanded money, and I tossed them a couple of silver dollars I had in my vest pocket. They demanded gold, but I told them I had too much knowledge of the presence on that road of such as they were to carry gold with me. One of them asked what I had in my saddlebags, and I told him to come and see.

"Shall I dismount?" he said.

"Certainly, if you wish," I replied.

He found nothing to reward him in the saddlebags and turned, in some disgust, with his companion to search the baggage on the mule. Some articles of clothing were taken, but these were of no great value. I have never fully understood why no attempt was made to search my person

or to take my watch or the horse I rode. We pressed on when they were convinced there was no more valuable plunder.

On reaching Hamath word was sent back to the consul in Aleppo, and in course of time the full value of the goods taken was returned through the government.

On this occasion, as before, I turned aside to spend Sunday in Mahardeh. In the evening a party of Arab horsemen rode into the village and went to the sheik's house. They announced that they were out on a raid to settle a blood feud with another tribe. They advised the people of the village, with whom they were friendly, to stay at home the next day, lest they get mixed up in the fray. On Monday, as a consequence, not a soul stirred out of town, and my departure for Hamath was postponed until the next day.

On Tuesday morning we set out about nine o'clock, my man riding the mule with the baggage. Habeeb was with me on his

gray mare, while I rode my tall sorrel horse. After about an hour we came to the descent toward the bridge. On the bluff, on the farther side, I saw two horsemen riding at right angles to our course. I called Habeeb's attention to them by asking him about the road on the bluff. He told me there was a road up there, but that those men were not on it, but were plowmen in the fields. I could see more clearly and assured him they were well-mounted and armed men. Soon the men changed their course and started down the slope in such a way as to intercept us at the bridge. Should we turn back? At last Habeeb said:

"They are only two and we are three; let us go ahead."

Just at that moment two other horsemen appeared in the valley, also headed for the bridge. Then Habeeb said we must turn back, as he thought a large body of men was probably concealed in the valley

farther up. I objected that our man with the loaded mule would fall into their hands, even though we might make an escape on our good horses. Habeeb replied that we would bring a rescue party from the nearest village. So we told the man to offer no resistance, but to allow the robbers to take the mule and the load, and we would hasten back to the rescue. Then we put our horses to the gallop. At once the four horsemen did likewise, coming in hot pursuit, but we had a long start.

On reaching the higher level we halted our horses for a moment's rest, and Habeeb fired his revolver into the air to attract attention. The horsemen had not yet overtaken the mule. After a moment's pause it was agreed that I should push on to Mahardeh to bring help, while Habeeb delayed to see what the men would do to the muleteer. My long-legged sorrel was glad of a chance to gallop across the level plain, and I did not check his speed.

As I passed over a slight rise in the ground, I came suddenly upon a gruesome sight at one side of the road. In the stubble field a disheveled man stood by his camel, evidently trying to defend himself against two highwaymen, whose horses stood by them while they were trying to get possession of the camel. The blood was running down the face of the poor man from a blow he had received on the head from the ruffian's club. As soon as they saw a horseman coming at full speed, they dropped the camel's halter, sprang to the saddle, and started off as fast as their horses could travel, evidently taking me for a soldier in pursuit of them.

When I reached the village, a posse of men was quickly gathered and we started back. On reaching Habeeb, near the place where I had left him, our comedy of errors was revealed. The horsemen from whom we had fled were soldiers in pursuit of the robbers whom I had frightened. When

the soldiers saw us turn in flight, they were convinced that we were the miscreants for whom they sought. In my flight from the soldiers, I came upon the very men they were seeking to capture. Such occurrences upon the road in that vicinity are almost daily incidents, for the wandering Arabs levy a regular tribute upon the peasants.

There is a considerable village through which I have often passed in going back and forth over the district. This was a Christian village where the Orthodox Greek Church holds a conspicuous place. On one occasion, as we came near the village, it seemed to be deserted. There was no one on the threshing floor. No one was at the fountain for water. No flocks of cattle and sheep were to be seen. As we came up to water our horses, we saw that many of the houses were roofless and that the church appeared utterly forlorn. Upon inquiry it was discovered that there had

been a quarrel with Moslems of a neighboring town in which one of the latter had been killed. The result was the entire scattering of the population of this village to other places, while their homes were allowed to go to ruin. This is not the only deserted village I have seen in our comparatively small territory.



BRINGING WATER FROM THE RIVER

VIII

A NIGHT ON THE ROOF

THE atmosphere of Mahardeh is very dry, since the sea breezes are deprived of all their moisture when they pass the mountains along the coast. In the hot summer days one may often see the clouds drifting over the tops of the Nusairiyeh mountains to the west, indicating a strong wind from the Mediterranean. The fleecy clouds bank up higher and higher, most acceptably suggesting great snow banks when the temperature is over one hundred in the shade — only there is no shade! But just as soon as the clouds roll over the crest like a billowy cascade, they vanish absolutely in the dry, hot air of the interior plain, disappearing as silently and as completely as do the icebergs when they come into the warm Gulf Stream in the Atlantic.



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There is no dew in the interior, so the people all sleep on the flat roofs through the six dry months from May to October. As soon as the sun sets, mats are spread upon the roof and preparations are made for supper.

It is a fascinating experience. Seated on the mat, we can look over the low parapet and watch the children at play upon the threshing floor. Happy, care-free childhood is much the same the world over. These youngsters have little to bother them in the way of costume and little to hamper their movements in play. Bare feet save all the annoyance of shoes and stockings. Bare heads or little skull caps leave little to trouble the upper end of the body, while one loose garment like a long shirt reaches from shoulder to ankle and gives perfectly free and natural play to all the muscles.

From every direction men and women are returning from work, which varies according to the season, but is never light. To the

east we can see the pile of refuse which is found beside every village. This hill is the accumulation, for generations, of the manure from dooryards and the straw from the threshing floors. It is the perpetual burning of waste material referred to in Christ's words about the destruction of the wicked in the last day. Through much of the summer the threshing floor will be piled high with the golden grain, while the sharp threshing instrument "having teeth," of Isaiah may be seen waiting for the morrow's task, and the unmuzzled oxen and the horses are getting their share of the year's produce. A straw tray will be brought for the men of the family to eat their supper, after which the women of the household will take their turn from what is left. A huge watermelon may be brought and slaughtered, as the people say, the pieces being placed in a large basin, from which those present help themselves as they feel disposed.

When supper has been cleared away, a company of friends will gather about us and a pleasant evening will be spent in varied conversation. Religion is sure to hold a prominent place in the talk, but it is not the only thing discussed; there will be questions about current events, problems in science, and information on all sorts of subjects. The question of the stability of the earth or its revolution about the sun is still a vital subject of discussion in many of these village gatherings. The evening will be finished with a simple service of prayer, and those from other homes will take their leave, while we remain with our hosts, free to seek repose. When the moon is our companion in these evenings on the roof, a lantern is needed only for reading, as the night is nearly as light as day, and, even when there is no moon, the starlit sky gives ample light for all ordinary purposes. The beds are spread on the flat roof, and sometimes nearly cover its surface. The

clear, cool air, the bright, azure sky, the beautiful stars above, and the quiet earth below are accompaniments for a night's rest not surpassed in my experience.

The sun rises very early, and the one who sleeps on the roof must be up betimes. The heat of the sun begins as soon as it appears above the horizon. If one is awake early, it is interesting to note the gradual resumption of activity in the quiet village. On the roofs all about, one may see the people getting ready for the day's work. The mothers and sisters are rolling up the beds and stowing them away from the hot sun, which would quickly rot the cloth. The younger girls of about ten years of age are in charge of the still younger children, each one carrying a younger brother or sister astride her own thigh. The fathers and brothers are seen shaking their clothing into shape and stretching themselves, for they sleep in the same clothes they wear in the day. On the ground below,

men are starting for the field or the day's journey, while the cattle and sheep are starting for pasture.

To the north is the road to the river from which the water for the village is brought. On this road at dawn may be seen a long line of women and girls who have already made the trip of a mile on foot and are now returning, each bearing on her head a heavy copper vessel holding many gallons of water. Their erect carriage is most instructive, and one cannot but admire the dignity and gravity with which they conduct themselves, and rejoice in their bright faces and cheery voices. It is fully a mile to the bluff over the river and then a steep descent of over a hundred feet to the water's edge. In the summer season the girls are apt to throw off the one loose garment each wears and take a plunge and swim in the river before filling the copper vessel and returning home to a day of hard work.

Some years ago, when the cholera ap-

peared in Mahardeh, the men of the village wanted to do some special work of merit so as to avert the pestilence. They agreed to repair this road by which the women reach the river, and since that time the ascent from the water's edge has been materially easier than it was.

IX

THE SON AND SUCCESSOR

WHEN I first made the acquaintance of Habeeb, his family consisted of the wife who had shared so many of his early sufferings, a daughter and a young son. This daughter and her cousin were the first girls of the village to brave public opinion so far as to leave home for school. "What does a girl need of learning?" had been the old idea among the simple village folk. They feared the girls' heads would be filled with useless ambitions and that they would no longer accept the conditions of their old life, and hence parents were averse to the idea. Nor was it an easy thing for the young girls themselves. They must leave behind them the free life of the open country and accept the restrictions of the city. They must adopt the city style of

clothes instead of their own picturesque village costume. They must adapt themselves more and more to the new foreign ideas in dress and conduct.

The names of Habeeb's two children are interesting as illustrating the poetic ideals of this oriental people. The daughter's name, Khushfeh, means a gazelle, while her brother's name, Dergam, means a young lion. When the lad had made a beginning in his studies in the simple village school, his father asked to have him sent to a boarding school and fitted to become a teacher. He said, "I know it will never be easy to get a teacher from elsewhere to come to Mahardeh, and so we must prepare one of our own boys to teach our village school, and I am ready to have my son so trained."

The lad was sent to Sidon — a long journey in those days. He was taken on horseback to Hamath, four hours away. Then followed a day and a half in a stagecoach

to Tripoli, and three days' horseback riding from Tripoli to Sidon.

When the teacher-training course had been pursued sufficiently, Dergam began to teach the village school and gave himself to this work for some years. But Habeeb was not yet content. He felt that he was approaching the end of his own useful activity and was anxious to have his successor ready. Nor did he feel that the life of a simple village school-teacher would provide permanent scope for the ability and ambition of his son.

Arrangements were then made for him to study theology, and for this purpose he was sent to Beirut. It was a glad day for the loving father when he received his son back as his assistant in ministering to the home church. After some years of this joint ministry, the father retired from active life and the son assumed responsible charge as acting pastor of the church in which he had grown up from infancy. For some

years it has been a joy to see the quiet delight of the father and the steady growth of the son in spiritual power, as both serve, in their different ways, the church whose history has been so closely interwoven with their own family life.

It was not only the son who followed the father's path of service. After finishing her school life, Khushfeh also gave herself to teaching, and has spent many years in efficient service as a teacher and Bible woman. The whole family and all their possessions have been devoted to the service of the Master. According to oriental custom, a man is always designated as his son's father, so we all know our Mahardeh friend as Abu Dergam rather than as Habeeb.

X

EASTER CELEBRATIONS

IN many matters each district, or even each village, is a law unto itself in regard to specific customs. In Mahardeh the celebration of the Greek Easter is unique in many details. In this, as in some other matters, there is a spirit of communism among the people which may have its rise in the fact that they hold their land in common, each peasant owning a certain share and not a certain plot of land.

Whatever may be the cause, Easter Monday is a great day every year in Mahardeh. It is at that time the young people display their new clothes; a point in which they are not so far removed from their friends on the western side of the Atlantic. After the Monday morning mass, all the young people gather for a holiday — and it is not



EASTER CELEBRATION



necessary to define very carefully the limits of youth. Mounted on horses, the young men form a grand procession and parade, going quite around the village, starting at the church door. At intervals, they break the line of march and race each other across the threshing floors and the open fields. All this time an admiring crowd of women and girls, also in festal array, accompanies the procession, grouping together between the line of march and the village, and showing their delight when a favorite exhibits some special skill in horsemanship. The whole is accompanied by firing of guns and pistols, so the effect is almost that of an oriental Fourth of July.

When the procession returns to the church yard, the horses are sent home and the young people form circles in the inclosure, holding hand in hand, men and women together. Then begins the dance which they call the "debky." It does not look exciting to us Westerners, but it is a great event

to the villagers. To the dull beating of a drum, the circles dance or jump about in the ring almost as soberly as American children play "Ring around the rosy." Sometimes expert dancers will display their skill amid much waving of kerchiefs and hearty applause.

More than once these annual gatherings have been made the occasion for bigoted attack on the Protestants. Many years ago, when Habeeb was building his own house, he had warning that the young men intended to tear down the walls when the procession passed the place. Forewarned is forearmed, so Habeeb invited a number of Moslem friends and Arab sheiks to visit him and see the procession on Easter Monday. They accepted the invitation, having an intimation that there was a reason. They took their position near the new building to watch the procession. When the leaders came near and saw a group of swarthy Arabs, they speedily

decided they did not care for any closer inspection at that time.

The latest outbreak of fanaticism was just before Easter, 1906. I made it convenient to spend that particular Sunday in the village and stayed over Monday, ostensibly to share the Easter festivities. It will never be known whether anything violent would have happened if there had been no foreigner at hand; but it is certain that serious threats had been made, though they were not carried out.

XI

WEDDING CUSTOMS

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The festivities begin on Saturday after-



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noon. The bridegrooms are all taken by their friends to the bluff overlooking the river, and are there properly shaved for the occasion. Then all are mounted on horses, and there is a grand display of horsemanship, the men racing back and forth across the level plain. About the middle of the afternoon, groups of women may be seen emerging from the village carrying on their heads highly colored straw trays holding the new clothes and wedding finery of the grooms. With singing and laughter, each group of women finds the young man of its household. They make him dismount and assume his new robes and gay headdress. After this there is more riding until sundown, this time in the new gala array. Then all the grooms go to the house of the sheik, where they are entertained for supper, and where they all sleep. During the night, other young men, the less fortunate comrades of the grooms, are expected to mani-

fest their cunning and bravery by slipping in surreptitiously to the sheik's room and stealing some article belonging to any one of the sleeping grooms. In case of success, the stolen article is kept until morning, when the raider goes to a neighboring roof with his trophy. There he advertises the matter, taunting the careless owner and calling upon him to redeem his loss in some way.

On Sunday afternoon, the grooms again mount their horses. This time the brides, too, are provided with mounts, and all ride out on the plain together. They make a procession around the village in much the same way as during the Easter festivities. There is much singing and gayety by both spectators and performers. The circuit of the town is finished about sundown. Then the several couples are distributed to their new homes, each groom accompanied by his bride. At once the priests begin their rounds, marrying one couple after another

until the list is complete. If the number of couples is large it may take the priest until morning to finish his task.

On Monday morning, each bride decks herself out in her finest wedding garments and puts on all the jewelry she possesses. Then she takes the large copper vessel on her head and starts for the river on her first errand of service for her new home. It is a gay scene as these finely decorated brides set out from the village. Such a large display of wealth has been known to arouse the cupidity of the Arabs, so that at times it has been deemed prudent for the men of the village to be under arms and within call when the procession is on the way, lest the women should be attacked and robbed.

When they return home with this first fruit of their labor for their new homes, the water is not taken into the house as it is considered too precious for ordinary use. Instead, it is poured out as a libation at the

door. In doing this the people are moved by something akin to the thought of David when he poured out the water which had been brought to him from Bethlehem at the risk of his loyal followers' lives.

Frequently it is the exception which proves the rule, so I may describe an experience I have had in Mahardeh which was very different from the ordinary procedure. One spring we had been spending a number of days in the village. We learned that two widowers wished to be married, but that, owing to the circumstances, they preferred not to join in the customary village festivities; they wished to have a quiet wedding at a different time, and so desired my services. I consented, and it was arranged that the ceremony should be late at night, after the rest of the villagers had gone to sleep. We waited for the summons until ten o'clock, a late hour for such a community. At last a relative of one of the grooms came and reported that they

had been hunting in vain for the bride, so we might as well go to bed ourselves. The girl was unwilling to give up her rights in the regular village wedding. She was not a widow, and did not plan to get married more than once in her life and wanted all that was coming to her this time and so had successfully vanished from sight.

About midnight a loud knocking at the door roused us, and we were told that the bride had been discovered and that all things were ready. I got up and set out in the frosty night by the light of a lantern, and made my way to the house where both couples were waiting for a double ceremony. The two brides and grooms sat on rolls of bedding, as there were no chairs in the room. One man held the lantern for me to read the service and two renewed households were set up. The whole setting was certainly weird in the extreme. I asked with some curiosity where they had found the little bride, and learned that she had

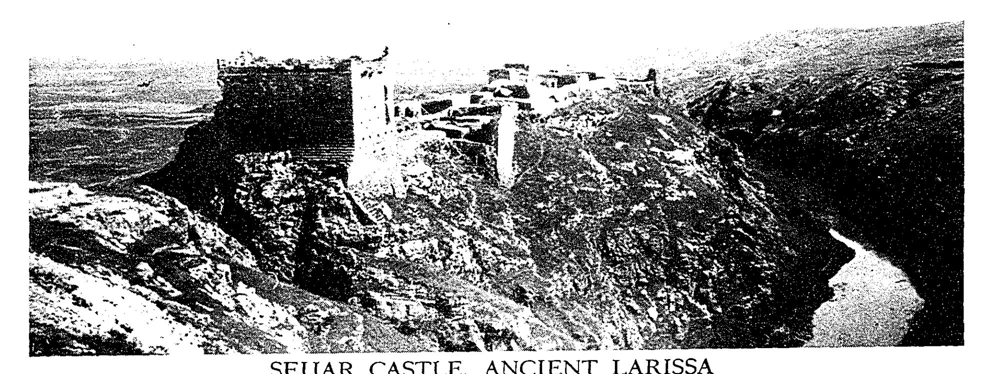
fled to the house of a neighbor who was a relative. There she had concealed herself behind one of the large bins used for storing grain for household use. Although started on her married life without much enthusiasm and without the customary festivities, I have not seen that her experience has been materially less happy than those who have started out more auspiciously.

Another unusual wedding in Mahardeh was that of Habeeb's only son, Dergam. It was desired by the family to make this event distinctive, and yet to arrange it in such a way as to please the people of the village and show a friendly recognition of their customs. Great preparations were made to entertain everybody. When the appointed day arrived, there was great bustle and activity in the home of Habeeb. Five sheep were killed for the wedding breakfast, and five large copper caldrons on as many separate fires in the courtyard were filled with rice and wheat. Great

vessels of prepared food were placed on large trays in every available place; some were in the house, some in the yard, and others on the roof. When all was ready, a loud voice from the roof summoned everybody to the feast. No one in the whole town was excluded, and it is doubtful if anyone who was not sick in bed failed to get a share. As fast as one set withdrew, a fresh supply of food was furnished from the great caldrons and new groups gathered about the trays. Old men and boys, women and girls, in what seemed like an endless stream, followed each other, until all were satisfied. Then we went to the bride's home to bring her to the church. Decked out in her finest array, she was placed upon a horse and covered with a pink veil. The gay procession then went outside the village to the Protestant church. At every step the crowd grew until when it reached the church premises it was a veritable mob. For once everyone in Mahardeh was deter-

mined to see how the Protestants conducted their weddings. The building was far too small to hold all the throng. Crowding, pressing, jostling and laughing they pushed in from every side. I tried to arrange the bridal party in front of the reading desk, but the surging crowd behind made it impossible to preserve the places. I tried to begin the service, but the tumult of those who could not see drowned every word. A more insistent but at the same time good-natured crowd I think I have never seen. For a time it seemed almost hopeless to proceed, but finally the simple service was completed, congratulations were given to the young couple, and another home was established.





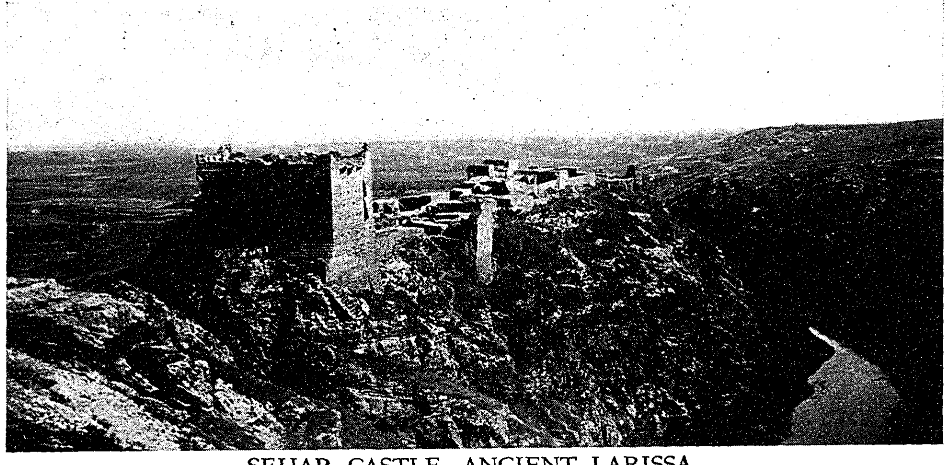
SEIJAR CASTLE, ANCIENT LARISSA

XII

A MAHARDEH PICNIC

THE stranger in Mahardeh is sure to be invited to the river. The general level of the plain on which the village lies is a rolling prairie without a tree to be seen, about a hundred feet above the bed of the Orontes. The river itself twists about in a most serpentine course in a deep and narrow gorge cut through the limestone bluffs underlying the red soil, from which the peasants raise their crops. Owing to the winding course of the river, it may be reached at any one of several bends at almost equal distance from the village.

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On a warm summer afternoon several of us set out for a mill down by the river. A donkey carried some bread and cucumbers and other substantials for the lunch, and

each of us carried a towel in anticipation of a bath in the river. Some of the party rode and some walked, for the distance was not great. As we rode along the level plain we had extended views in every direction. The top of Lebanon was visible to the south; the low mountain which marks the vicinity of Hamath was to the east, while the whole western horizon was cut off by the ragged, black Nusairiyeh mountains. To the north we looked over the ravine in which flows the Orontes to a continuation of the same rolling plain that extends quite to Aleppo and Aintab. Habeeb called our attention to a rude, dome-roofed building just across the river which is said to be the tomb of Abu Ubeideh, one of Mohammed's group of special favorites. He then told us this legend:

"Near the shrine of Abu Ubeideh in the bluff at the brink of the river valley is a deep, round hole in the solid rock. It is said that the prophet Elijah was at one

time riding a horse in flight from impious pursuers. His horse brought him at a furious pace to this point, not knowing of the deep river valley. The peril of horse and rider was imminent as a few steps more would have hurled both to sudden death at the foot of the precipice. The prophet at once planted his spear in the rock, thus making the curious indentation. By the aid of the spear the horse was enabled to make a flying leap, clearing the river valley at a bound. Both landed safely on the south side, out of reach of their pursuers."

With such tales we passed the time until we reached the bluff and started down the steep slope. It was no mean picture that was spread out before us. The rugged, rocky bluffs on both sides of the river were draped with a variety of bushes and vines whose green leaves were a great relief from the dull brown of the plain we had left. At the bottom ran the muddy Orontes,

famous in classic story, its banks carpeted with grass and wild flowers. It is an Arabic saying that "Every road leads to a mill," and — sure enough — nestling in the curve of the river was a busy flour mill. As we came near, the white-robed miller came out upon the bridge-dam to see who this party might be. Pleasant salutations were exchanged, for everyone knows Habeeb; and upon inquiry we found a good-sized white fish ready to add to our supper. These millers set traps for the fish by placing a basket just below the rushing of the sluice-way, where fish are sure to be caught in the swirl of the current and landed in the basket by their own struggles against the stream. The fish so caught are in exceptionally good condition, having feasted on the grain from the mill.

We found a good place for the horses, and after a refreshing dip in the cool, swift river we were quite ready for supper. Fuel was gathered and the fish was broiled over

the glowing coals; it made the chief attraction of one of the most delicious picnic suppers to be imagined.

In another direction from Mahardeh, a half-hour's walk brought us to the point where the river leaves its deep ravine and flows across a broad plain until its course is turned north by the Nusairiyeh mountains. It follows the foot of these mountains until it reaches Antioch, where it breaks through to its outlet into the Mediterranean at the foot of Mount Cassius, near Swaidia or ancient Seleucia, whence Paul sailed more than once on the travels among the churches. It might be more correct to say that the high plain through which the ravine of the Orontes is cut drops away to the lower level, for as one stands on the margin of this higher level the vision stretches away to the west over a low, hot plain, rich but unwholesome. Far away in the river valley are the swampy lands in which wild boars are found. Nearer at

hand are villages in which live the peasants who cultivate the broad acres.

Just where the river turns to the north a clear eye can detect an old black castle called Mudik. It is the ancient Apamea, one of the important centers of the Seleucidian kingdom, a treasure city and a place for the breeding of horses for the imperial stable. We did not go to Mudik, as the journey would have been dangerous for our horses in the hot season; some places on the road are infested by a poisonous fly whose bite is terrifying to any animal and even fatal at times to those bred in other regions. I have seen a mule lie down under his load and roll and kick to rid himself of these cruel tormentors.

To the southwest is another most interesting old castle, Musiyaf, though this is not quite visible. The town beside this castle is unique in this portion of Syria in that it is an ancient walled town whose inhabitants still live inside the old walls. There

are many towns and cities in Syria which were once inclosed by walls, with gates that were shut at nights within the memory of men still living, but in most of these only fragments of the walls, or an occasional gate never closed, is all that remains of the old conditions. Musiyaf, however, has not outgrown its walls, which are still complete in their circuit about the place.

But we have a castle nearer at hand. Just before the Orontes leaves its narrow channel, it takes one of its sharp turns to the north, and then breaks out to the west, leaving a narrow, rocky promontory guarding and overlooking the whole western plain. A deep cutting in the rock some thirty feet wide has separated this promontory, making it an almost inaccessible hill. The whole top was covered by the ancient town of Larissa, built by Seleucus Nicator, with a fine castle as its citadel. From inside the castle a secret channel gave

access to the river in times of siege. All has gone to ruin now except portions of the walls and the citadel which occupied the landward end of the hill. Of this the walls of well-cut limestone still stand — a token of the skill and perseverance of those ancient warriors. From a bend in the river near where we had our picnic supper a channel was cut through the rock some hundred feet below the surface to carry the water out to the plain to irrigate the gardens opposite ancient Larissa. Such engineering work is not an exclusive right of the later days. This old channel still carries waters to the rude gardens of the dirty modern village of Seijar, which occupies the site of the ancient fortress.

The tomb of Abu Ubeideh is very highly esteemed by the Moslems and the shrine has become rich in endowments and lands from the vows of those who visit it from year to year. Those who enter it to-day

find a caretaker at hand who receives a stated salary to live in that solitary spot and keep constantly burning the light in the little sweet-oil lamp at the head of the grave.

XIII

A PRISON CONVERSION

MANY years ago, a man in Mahardeh was arrested, tried and condemned to fifteen years of imprisonment. He was confined in the Tripoli Castle. There is little opportunity for useful occupation or even for innocent amusement in a Turkish prison; but this man sought to make some profit out of his enforced idleness. He secured an Arabic primer and induced some of his fellow prisoners to teach him the elements of reading. When he had mastered the primer, he continued his reading in the Gospels. After a time he was removed to the Hamath prison. Here he was found by the Protestant preacher of Hamath and provided with good reading matter and instructed in the truth. It was not long before he felt his personal need as a sinner,

and realized the truth of the evangelical teaching.

Among the matters of his former life that troubled his awakened conscience was his relation to the woman with whom he had been living at the time of his arrest. They had never been married, but she had been waiting for him loyally during the whole period of imprisonment, and was ready to resume her old relation to him on his release. It was arranged that, on his release, he should go to his own home, the woman remaining with her people until one of the missionaries should visit Mahardeh. As it happened, we were there only a few days after the man's release from prison.

In the desire to make as little stir about the matter as possible, only a few were informed of the proposed wedding. Those who came in to spend the evening were dismissed rather earlier than usual, on the presumption that the fatigued missionaries

wished to retire. After all had left and the town was quiet, messengers were sent to assemble the bridal party. Women went across the flat roofs from house to house and brought the woman, closely veiled; while the men brought the bridegroom through the narrow and crooked streets. When all was ready, it was a memorable scene. Not many were present, but an air of serious solemnity was upon all faces. The groom, a stalwart man who had seen much of the harder experiences of life, stood up to pledge himself to the woman with whom he had formerly lived a sinful life, but who had remained faithful to him while suffering the penalty of his lawless deeds. Instead of a union of two young lives with an untried world before them, it seemed like an effort to patch up a new life out of the fragments of two which had been sadly marred. And yet there was much to give joy in this recognition of God's law, after so much of suffering and

sorrow from violation of it. "At evening time there shall be light."

The next day, at the communion table, this bride was received into church fellowship, and later the husband made his public profession of faith in Christ, not many months before the call to leave this earthly life with all its sorrow and sin.

XIV

CIVIL PREFERMENT

THE contrasts and changes in life and its complex relations are finely illustrated in one of the latest experiences that has come to Habeeb. Under the constitutional government in Turkey there has been a development of local self-government in many ways. Municipal courts have been established in many towns which never dreamed of such things under the old régime. Mahardeh was one of the places for which a municipal organization was ordered, and great interest was taken in the election of members of the new court. Most of those active in the matter were ambitious for prestige and perquisites.

It was no surprise, considering the size of the Protestant community, when it developed that one of the members elected

to the municipal court was our old friend Habeeb el-Yàziji. He had not sought the honor, but all felt that some one from the Protestants should be in the new court, and there was no one who could command united support so well as Habeeb. Word of the result of the election was sent to Hamath in order that the governor might designate which of the members elected should act as president of the council. Some of the political aspirants and wire pullers set various influences to work to lead the governor to appoint one of them to this position of influence and some emolument. It was suggested, among other things, that the member for whom the largest number of votes was cast should be president, as it was evident he represented the most numerous section in the constituency. Many arguments were advanced by one and another, while Habeeb did not appear as an aspirant at all. The governor was a man of good judgment,

who realized the importance of having the new council started under the guidance of a man of clear insight, integrity, and strength of character. He looked into the record of the several members-elect and chose as the first president of the municipality of Mahardeh Habeeb el-Yaziji, former preacher in the Evangelical Church.

What a contrast in the lifetime of one man! Once on the verge of martyrdom in the flames of persecution; often driven from the village as a disturber of the peace and corrupter of the youth; opposed and resisted in his public and private career; at last selected by the Turkish governor as civil president of the municipality.

XV

THE MAN

IT is not easy, in a limited space, and in formal language, to give an adequate conception of a strong, living personality. Nor does the task become easier when that personality is held in one's heart by the ties of loving fellowship, cemented by years of association in the service of mankind in things spiritual. And yet I cannot lay down my pen without an attempt to sketch, though inadequately, the character of Habeeb.

One of the first things I heard about him was a very simple but thoroughly characteristic incident. He was riding from Hamath to Mahardeh in the winter season in company of the Hamath preacher. When they reached a stream crossing the road there was a choice of paths. The fording

of the stream was usually simple and natural. A slight detour made the crossing by an ancient bridge. Although there was considerable water running in the stream, Habeeb headed his donkey to the ford. He carried in his saddlebags a supply of sugar for household use. In the stream the donkey stumbled, throwing his rider into the water and dissolving the sugar in the swift current. The inconvenience of wet clothing was not slight and the loss of the sugar was not insignificant; but there was no sign of anger, no disposition to abuse the animal, and the only comment made in response to expressions of sympathy over the misfortune was, "Ma besail, ma laishe," "It makes no difference, it is of no consequence." Such was his temperament always, quietly accepting accomplished facts and submitting to whatever had occurred. This did not indicate a weakness of disposition, nor an inability to display a righteous indignation where blame was merited.

Through all his life Habeeb has never spared himself effort where exertion was called for and would be effective. He has never tried to shirk personal responsibility by expecting miraculous intervention from God, nor by shifting the obligation on the shoulders of others. After doing all that he could do himself, and after urging all about him to faithful activity, he constantly laid all his affairs before the Master he served and then waited the result, accepting whatever might be ordered as quietly and philosophically as he did the dissolving of the sugar in the stream. He might be haled to prison, he might be cursed and abused by his neighbors, he might be opposed and neglected by his nearest relatives, he might suffer financial loss or meet physical suffering, but the serious face never gave any sign of irritation and the quiet voice never trembled with undue excitement. It was always, "Never mind, it is of no consequence."

Not indolence or inaction, but a clear recognition of the power of an inscrutable Providence was the key to his manner. He would yield a loyal submission to the will of Him whose love encompasses all his children, and whose reasons need not be revealed to them, for they might not understand them even if they were revealed.

In the home he was strict in discipline but at the same time tender. His brothers as well as his children looked to him for counsel and help in times of trouble and for sympathy in time of sorrow, and were ready to accept from him stern rebuke at times of weakness or mistake.

The church and the village at large came to him in all circumstances. If anyone was sick, Habeeb was the one to be consulted, since there was no doctor to be had. If there was danger from the Arabs, Habeeb was sure to be one of the council called to take measures of protection. If there was a quarrel among the people, Habeeb was

most likely to secure a reconciliation. If there was a complication in the government, Habeeb was the one to arrange the matter or to act as intercessor.

Always ready to serve others and to yield his personal rights or comfort, he would never yield an iota in the matter of his religious beliefs. Firm but not bigoted, zealous but never hostile, he held firmly to his faith in Christ; and the one object of his long life was to win all his neighbors to the faith and trust in the one Saviour. It was a joyful day for him when his old mother entered the Church and it has never ceased to be a cause of grief that the father never yielded. He gave up all hostile opposition years before his death, and was unspeakably proud of his favorite child's position of honor and influence in the village. The old man could not, however, overcome his personal pride so far as to identify himself with the faith he had once persecuted.

A wise counselor, a shrewd manager, a skillful leader of men — such he was. But it is not in these respects Habeeb will be longest remembered. Above all things he was an earnest follower of Christ and exemplar of his teachings, a true man, a loyal friend.

Such was — and still is — HABEEB THE BELOVED.



